

Towards multicultural memory: Struggles over a Muslim cemetery in post-Civil War Asturias, Spain

Ethnicities

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Elisabeth Becker 

Max Weber Institute for Sociology, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany

Ángela Suárez-Collado

Political Sciences Area, University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain

Paula M Arana Barbier 

Max Weber Institute for Sociology, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany

Abstract

This article traces struggles over a Muslim cemetery in post-Civil War Asturias, Spain, highlighting the centrality of multicultural memory in creating an inclusive contemporary society. Drawing on theories of multiculturalism put forth by Civil Sphere Theory and the British School of Multiculturalism, we shed light on the bifurcating cultural narrative of the civil (victim) and uncivil (perpetrator) and its grasp on collective memory, complicating this still-dominant perspective through the ambivalent and unsettling role of the Moroccan Muslim soldier. We argue that largely hidden Muslim cemeteries throughout contemporary Spain, such as our case study in Barcia built during the Spanish Civil War, serve as a starting point for thinking about enduring spatial and cultural exclusions in Spain's civil sphere: that is, those who are deemed civil or uncivil in both present and past, kept apart through their association with danger, threat, and deviance from Spanish values/norms. We further emphasize not only national but also regional social, cultural and political configurations that give shape to understandings of who belongs, both in life and after death. Drawing on ethnographic visits to the cemetery, interviews with local stakeholders in the cemetery, as well as local and regional archives, we develop a theory

Corresponding author:

Elisabeth Becker, Max Weber Institute for Sociology, University of Heidelberg, Bergheimer Str 58, Heidelberg 69115, Germany.

Email: elisabeth.becker-topkara@mw.uni-heidelberg.de

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of multidirectional memory, that is: the overlap and interference of memories that help to constitute the public sphere, specifically by expanding the range of imagined life experiences for the members of a society—thereby expanding the imagined community in the present through recognition of a shared history.

Keywords

Muslims, Spain, Asturias, Civil War, memory, cemeteries, Franco, multiculturalism, Moors

A largely abandoned Muslim cemetery used for the burial of Moroccan soldiers during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) sits on the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage route that stretches across Northern Spain. A small metal sign posed in front of the entrance to the cemetery describes the site. One needs to be on the lookout to find this space, tucked behind thickets and trees on the edges of the town of Barcia, Lluarca, in the region of Asturias. Once found, the site is, however, clearly identifiable as a cemetery, its curved doorway reflecting those of Muslim cemeteries in North Africa. In its shape and form, it speaks not only to this cultural legacy but also to the legacy of war. The walls surrounding the burial ground are made of stacked bricks with holes cut into their sides for the muzzles of guns. Outside of its walls, one encounters the remains of a room in which to wash dead bodies. Inside its walls, large stones meant to demarcate bodies sink into wet earth, surrounded by overgrown underbrush. There a single, body-sized hole suggests a recent exhumation.

We discovered this cemetery through our broader research project on Moroccan Muslim soldiers who fought for Franco and the infrastructure of the Muslim institutions created to serve their needs during the Spanish Civil War (De Madariaga, 2015). As Paula Arana Barbier's article "Moros y Cristianos Together? The Politics of Death and Muslims in Spain" in this special issue outlines, these cemeteries, whether repurposed for burials by contemporary Muslim communities (as in Granada and Sevilla), sites of cultural heritage (as in a Coruña) or historical burial sites with indeterminate futures (as in the case of Barcia) span the country. While Arana Barbier explores the historical emergence of these cemeteries writ large, providing a sociocultural and geographical survey of their emplacement in Spain, we hone in on the case of the Barcia cemetery in order to speak to the intersection of multiculturalism and the politics of death in Asturias: a region recognized as the last holdout against Franco and also the last holdout against early modern Muslim rule that spanned from 711 to 1492.

We highlight the importance of national and regional sociopolitical imaginaries in shaping multicultural possibilities in life and after death while tracing the concurrent imagined and material obstacles to recognizing this cemetery as a cultural heritage site. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Civil Sphere Theory (CST) and the British School of Multiculturalism (BSM), we illuminate how the politics of death is both affected by and affects multiculturalism through this specific case. In so doing, we argue that

Muslims in Spain are to this day perceived as not only outsiders of the Spanish civil sphere, the “uncivil” other within, but as explicitly anti-national (again, see Arana Barbier). This perception, however, contends with a more recent past of Muslim entanglement with the Spanish nation through Franco’s recruitment of Moroccan Muslim soldiers for the Civil War. Ultimately, by analyzing the struggle over this cemetery’s present and future, we argue for a more explicit theorization of multiculturalism and the politics of death through the concept of *multicultural memory*. As in BSM, we herein link theorizing with empirical research, focusing on Muslims and paying attention to the local context—specifically by homing in on the Asturias region of Spain. We also engage with Civil Sphere Theory to demonstrate how the figure of the Moroccan Muslim soldier complicates binary notions of civility/incivility, particularly the distinction between perpetrator and victim in the Spanish Civil War. Ultimately, we argue that civil repair, that is, the inclusion of Muslims into modern Spain, requires not only a multicultural imagination of the present but equally multicultural memory that rethinks the juxtaposition of Muslims to Spanish nationhood.

The largely hidden Muslim cemeteries throughout contemporary Spain, such as the one in Barcia built during the Spanish Civil War, serve as a starting point for thinking about enduring spatial and cultural exclusions in Spain’s civil sphere: that is, those who are deemed civil or uncivil in both present and past, kept apart through their association with danger, threat, and deviance from Spanish values/norms (Zapata-Barrero, 2006). The endurance of these cultural exclusions is both explicit and implicit, accomplished as much through governance as a prevailing memory culture: abetted by a widespread silence regarding the dictatorship, a social amnesia politically engineered through the so-called Pact of Silence instated during the transition to democracy after Franco’s death. This Pact of Silence, essentially an agreement not to talk about the dictatorship or war in public life, was put in place by leading politicians to avoid reanimating the divisions that led to the Civil War, but in so doing, thwarted the possibilities of fully reckoning with the aftermath of a long and brutal period of fascist rule (Aguilar and Payne, 2016). It also thwarted attempts to unsettle a powerful victim/perpetrator dichotomy that still dominates collective memory in Spain and to replace it with a “continuum” of complicity and involvement on the one hand and experiences of persecution and suffering on the other (Druliolle, 2015). The Pact of Silence has nurtured an amnesiac relationship between the Civil War and dictatorship, a widely enforced top-down regime of forgetting.

In the following sections, we draw on ten interviews with stakeholders of the Barcia cemetery, including local politicians, regional government authorities, researchers, archaeologists, archivists, local civil society representatives, and leaders of the local Islamic community, and two ethnographic visits to the site. The research methodology also entails the use of primary and secondary sources on the Civil War in Asturias (the Historical Archives of Asturias, the Library of Asturias, and the General Archive of the Administration in Spain (AGA)), oral testimonies and mainstream news coverage (*La Nueva España*, *Región*, *La Prensa*, *El Noroeste*, and *El Comercio*) of the presence of Moroccan soldiers in the 1930s, as well as online media regarding the contemporary state of affairs at the Barcia cemetery.

We begin by emplacing the Barcia cemetery as a case study that illuminates the dual exclusions of the Moroccan Muslim soldier, a spatial incarnation of the cultural exclusion of those who fought for Franco and Muslims as part of Spanish history. These dual exclusions, we argue, are magnified in the regional context of Asturias: a place that identifies itself historically as the last holdout against early Moorish rule and also as a 20th-century holdout against Franco's nationalist regime. We shed light on the bifurcating cultural narrative of the civil (victim) and uncivil (perpetrator) and its grasp on collective memory, complicating this still-dominant perspective through the ambivalent and unsettling role of the Moroccan Muslim soldier. In the empirical section of our paper that follows, we trace attempts to convert this cemetery into a cultural site while preserving its role as a place of burial site (not exhuming bodies). Ultimately, we expose the enduring tensions over both present and past multicultural inclusion as well as the concurrent challenges to and potentialities for multicultural memory that includes Muslims in historical and contemporary understandings of Spain.

Memory cultures: The silent afterlives of Moroccan Muslim soldiers

Both national and regional memory cultures shape the story of the Muslim cemetery in Barcia: here, the collective memory of early modern Muslim differentiation and a broadly amnesiac relationship to post-Civil War Spain (De Madariaga, 1988a; De Madariaga, 2015). Historically, there have been two contrasting attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims in general, and towards Moroccans, in particular, in Spain: "Maurophobia", which casts Arabs and Muslims in a negative light, and "Maurophilia", which acknowledges and values the significant contributions of Arab culture to Spain's cultural heritage (De Madariaga, 1988b; Martin Corrales, 2004). Nonetheless, the predominant view of Muslims among Spaniards, often colloquially referred to as "Moors", has been negative. This negative portrayal has been shaped by various historical events since the eighth century, fostering stereotypes such as fanaticism, brutality, cruelty, indecency, fatalism, laziness (Martin Corrales, 2004: 40), and, notably, being *anti-national*, explicitly concerning the idealized notion of *Hispanidad* (entailing shared Spanish language and shared Catholic religion) that emerged during the Reconquista, casting Muslims out of the territory after 700 years of Muslim rule (Zapata-Barrero, 2006). The qualities associated with Muslims, their perceived threat to the Spanish nation through religio-cultural differences, and a (literally) buried history of Muslim presence in Spain thus thwarts true multicultural inclusion to this day (De Madariaga, 1988a; Lems and Planet Contreras, 2023).

It is far from common knowledge that 80,000 Moroccan soldiers formed part of Franco's troops during the Civil War and that his own personal guard (*La Guardia Mora*) consisted solely of Moroccan soldiers (Al Tuma, 2016; De Madariaga, 2015). This connection was not spurious, as Spain had established a colonial presence through its Protectorate in Morocco, founded via a treaty with France in 1912 and dissolved through the independence of Morocco in 1956 (De Madariaga, 2015). In deciding to recruit Moroccan soldiers, Franco drew on long-standing stereotypes of Muslims as brutal and effective warriors (Al Tuma, 2016), an image that had been entrenched throughout the previous period of Spanish military expansionism in

Morocco and the consolidation of the protectorate. The confrontation against the local population during the African War (1859-1860) and the Riffian War (1920-1927) reinforced the negative, pejorative images of “the Moor”, who was identified with barbarism, savagery, and despotism, while the Spanish side self-identified with the cause of freedom, civilization, and progress (Martin Corrales, 2004: 40–42). Fully cognizant of these existing stereotypes held by Spaniards about “the Moor”, Franco employed Moroccan soldiers both as expendable forces and as a psychological weapon to undermine the morale of Republican troops and the Spanish people (De Madariaga, 1992). And yet he also drew not only on the imagined physical strength of “the Moor” but equally on the material realities of economic precarity in his recruitment of these soldiers: targeting economically precarious young men by promising support in the form of salaries and food (De Madariaga, 1992). In his propaganda used to recruit Moroccan soldiers, Franco further cast the conflict as a religious war, pitting the Catholic Nationalists and Muslims together against the Republican atheists of Spain (Al Tuma, 2016).

Moroccan Muslim soldiers in the Spanish Civil War today face double exclusion from contemporary understandings of democratic Spanish nationhood: first, through their uncivil association with Franco (as anti-democratic) and second, through their uncivil association with the figure of “the Moor,” a powerful labeling of Muslim otherness that recalls Spain’s deep Muslim past. As Ricard Zapata-Barrero (Zapata-Barrero, 2006) has argued, it is vital to understand that Spain constructed its national identity in direct opposition to “the Moor.” The foundation of the Spanish nation-state began with the Reconquista and the casting out of Muslims (along with Jews) in 1492. That is, the foundational moment of Spanish nationhood entailed not only imagined differentiation from but an actual purging of Muslim life from Spain. The notion of *Hispanidad*, central to this project of Spanish nationhood, entailed a shared language (Spanish) and religion (Catholicism), thereby excluding Muslims, in general, and Moroccans (“Moors”), in particular (Zapata-Barrero, 2006). Spain remained a mono-confessional Catholic state through the duration of Franco’s rule. Yet even with the legal shift to a non-confessional order after the transition to democracy¹, Muslims today are perceived as dangerous outsiders: “enemies within the gates” of Spain (Lems and Planet Contreras, 2023; Schiffauer, 2006). Owing to the history of Muslim rule and its juxtaposition to the Spanish nation, the threat of “the Muslim” has held a unique and enduring place in Spanish nationalism (for more on the national regime of differentiation, see the article by Paula Arana Barbier). This is evidenced, for example, in the 2015 citizenship extraterritoriality law, which allowed the descendants of Jews cast out during the Reconquista to apply for citizenship but did not allow the same for Muslims (Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias Baglietto, 2023). The establishment of Muslim institutions, mosques in particular, and Muslim symbols, such as the headscarf, in public life have thus been topics of ongoing debate in Spain (Astor, 2012; Flesler, 2008; Schiffauer, 2006; Zapata-Barrero and De Witte, 2010).

Not only national but also regional contexts influence how Muslims and Islam are perceived, colored by local cultural mores and collective memory. The ambivalence towards Muslim history in Andalusia, for example, can be seen in the critical gaze cast on Muslims in the present as well as a flourishing tourist industry based on visits to places like the Alhambra and the Cordoba Mosque-Cathedral (Rogozen-Soltar, 2017; Schiffauer, 2006). Yet, the romanticization of Muslim rule, specifically the idealized

period of Convivencia, in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together peacefully in al-Andalus, does not extend to other temporalities or regions of Spain (Hirschkind, 2020). The northern region of Asturias, for instance, the only region of Spain never conquered by the Moors, has no such memory of Muslim rule (Guardado, 2023).

The story of this cemetery is thus shaped not only by these enduring and influential national narratives and memories but also by the specific regional memory culture of the Asturias region. Asturias perceives itself as uniquely distinct from Muslims, as it was never conquered by the Moors, who from 711 to 1492 ruled much of what is today Spain (Boyd, 2006; Solano Fernández-Sordo, 2021). Similarly, the strategic role of the Asturian territory for the advance towards Portugal and the control of the Spanish Northern Plateau in the war with France (1808-1814), as well as for the consolidation of the Northern Front during the Civil War (1936-1939), strengthened the image of Asturias as a bastion of resistance (Blázquez, 2003; Carantoña, 1984). These circumstances have contributed to powerful narratives about the uniqueness or exceptionalism of Asturias, both for Spanish nationalism and for resistance against Francoism and thereby against anti-democratic politics (through the workers' movement) (Aroca, 2008; Carrillo, 2011; García, 2014; Guardado, 2023; Ruíz, 1988).

The dual exclusions herein described, of Franco supporters as anti-national (anti-democratic) and Muslims as anti-national (anti-*Hispanidad*), are thus arguably magnified in the Asturias region, a region that—to great local pride—alluded Muslim rule and a place of significant resistance to the Franco regime (Zapata-Barrero, 2006). The memories of resistance in early and more recent history remain in regional narratives. Regarding the latter, the 1934 Asturian Uprising, for example, part of a larger socialist uprising against the increasingly fascist regime, animated a coalition of coal miners, socialists, anarchists, and communists against the nationalists. While ultimately defeated by the nationalist army (the so-called “Army of Africa”, which included a sizable contingent of Moroccan soldiers), this presented a serious threat to the Second Republic in Spain. The memory of miner-led resistance and its violent suppression remains potent in Asturias today (Álvarez, 2011). So, too, does the deeper historical memory of the unsuccessful attempt of Muslim rulers to reach and conquer the region in 722 (Borreguero, 2006). Muslims are thus largely absent from collective memory, and yet the remains of their lives, and also their deaths, in Asturias endure.

The case study: The Barcia cemetery and the Civil War in Asturias

The cemetery of Barcia is situated in an area locally referred as *La Rampla* (at the 500 km mark on national route 634), about 4 km from Lluarca, the county town. It spans roughly 4,500 square meters and, according to verbal accounts, was erected by the area's civilian populace over communal land, although its construction was directed by Muslim alfaquis (Álvarez Martínez et al., 2006). Enclosed by walls ranging from 1.35 to 2 meters in height and topped with a gable roof adorned with Arab tiles, the cemetery's rectangular layout is marked at each inner corner by a 3-meter-tall square tower that resembles a watchtower (Álvarez Martínez et al., 2006). These elements lend a military aspect to its form, one

likely influenced by the time of its construction. A monumental brick gate featuring a pointed horseshoe arch provides access to the graveyard. While the original sizeable wooden gate no longer exists, remnants of its frame and fasteners can still be found. Despite the undergrowth, the site reveals discernible grave and burial spaces, demarcated by slate slabs at both ends. The funerary complex is completed with an unfinished annex added to the burial ground where a room used to receive bodies, according to local narratives², can still be seen. The exact number of interments remains unclear. Research by [Álvarez Martínez et al., 2006](#) suggests a figure between 400 and 500, whereas records from the AGA, citing a 1940 document from the Asturian provincial government, mention the burial of “164 Moors” in Lluarca³. Similarly, some of our local interviewees estimate the number of burials between 150 and 200⁴. Meanwhile, the Asturias Democratic Memory governmental platform’s Grave Map indicates the total count of victims as undetermined, with only three identified to date. Nonetheless, it is argued that those laid to rest here were combat casualties⁵. It is noteworthy that there are sources⁶ that suggest that approximately 300 soldiers were temporarily buried in the ancient civilian cemetery of Barcia, with no subsequent exhumation taking place⁷.

The Civil War in Lluarca was characterized by its rapid capture by the nationalist faction. Following the initiation of the military uprising on July 18, 1936, a significant portion of Castilla y León, Galicia, Navarra, and Aragón, both archipelagos and Northern Morocco, aligned with the insurgents. In Asturias, the regional capital of Oviedo also joined the military coup, leading to a significant siege by those loyal to the Republic. To relieve besieged forces, military units known as the “Galician Columns” began advancing from Galicia on July 28th, 1936, aiming to support the surrounded troops by moving along the coast to the heart of Asturian territory ([González Prieto, 2011](#); [Álvarez Martínez, 2017](#)). Lluarca played a crucial role in this strategy, falling to the rebels on August 8th and becoming a pivotal point in the march towards Oviedo, especially after Colonel Martín Alonso, leading the Galician Columns in the west, set up his command post there ([González Prieto, 2011](#); [Suárez, 2021](#); [Vázquez Carril and Grandío Seoane, 2011](#)). Over the course of the next 15 months of conflict in Asturias (July 1936–October 1937), the town saw significant military, legal, health, and propaganda infrastructure developments, including the conversion of the Colón Theatre into barracks for the indigenous troops and the construction of the Barcia cemetery for the burial of many Moroccan soldiers⁸ killed in action, notably used as front-line forces in the push towards Oviedo ([Benjellon, 1988](#); [Álvarez Martínez, 2017](#)). It is thus possible that the cemetery’s proximity to the road to La Espina, a key point on the route to Oviedo, and Lluarca, one of the rearguard’s nerve centers, was why the insurgent forces chose this enclave.

Interviews conducted for this research⁹ and other oral histories consulted reveal that those buried in Barcia were casualties among the indigenous troops¹⁰, particularly noted in the battle at L’Escamplero – 10 km from Oviedo, where intense fighting took place until its capture on October 13th, 1936 ([Fleites Marcos, 2008](#)). A war survivor, who was ten years old at the time and lived alongside the “Galician Columns” and Moroccan troops in the L’Escamplero area, described his memory of this event:

“There was a battle at the Arca Peak. That one was sad and fierce [...] They (the Republicans) took over Arca Peak, which had to be recovered. A Tabor came, and the Moors did not want to go there because it was 3 pm, and they liked working at night. The lieutenant who commanded them shot three or four of them, and then they all went up, and they retook the Arca Peak. Many died that day and were carried to be buried in Barcia, where there is a Moorish cemetery. I saw in front of La Piñera, where that fig tree is, the bodies of the dead soldiers piled up, just as wood is piled up now, to transport them in trucks” (Rodríguez Fernández Biedes, 2002: 174).

The participation of Moroccan soldiers in the Civil War battles in Asturias was preceded by their earlier deployment during the October 1934 Revolution, during which they played a crucial role in the region’s pacification. Some recognized their intervention to restore order, but for many others, they were widely seen as brutal repressors (Álvarez Martínez, 2017). In this vein, the use of colonial warfare practices in Asturias, including disemboweling, decapitation, and mutilation (Villanueva, 2021), was denounced in the 1934 capitulation agreements, where the rebels specifically demanded the withdrawal of African soldiers from the battle lines. They argued that the conduct of these troops was incompatible with the standards of any civilized nation, directly contributing to the workers’ refusal to disarm, particularly in areas under severe threat (Grossi, 1978). This dual depiction of Moroccan soldiers highlights the enduring dichotomy of “Maurophilia” versus “Maurophobia” and, more specifically, the division fostered after the establishment of the Spanish protectorate in northern Morocco between the “friendly Moor” or “good Moor”, who sided with colonial rulers, with the “enemy Moor” or “bad Moor”, who fought against Spanish forces and targeted the villages of those who collaborated with Spain (De Madariaga, 1988b; Martín Corrales, 2004). The involvement of Moroccans in the military factions rebelling against the Republican government intensified this friend-foe dichotomy, which significantly influenced the later omission of Moroccans who perished in the Civil War from efforts to reclaim historical memory.

The Civil War in Asturias reflects a continuity in the bitterness between the Asturian population and the Moroccan troops that emerged after the 1934 Revolution. The newspaper ABC reported in this vein on October 20, 1936, that *“the resentment between Moors and miners stems from the ferocious repression of October, and in Asturias, numerous individuals seek to even the score.”* (Vázquez Carril and Grandío Seoane, 2011: 66). This sobering intention was also crystallized in popular culture like this song intoned in those initial moments of the conflict in Asturias (Rodríguez Fernández Biedes, 2003: 16):

“In the Naranco mountain

a little Moorish woman said:

if the Asturians win, I renounce Moorishness.

Fascists, mad dogs

who go to the plains,

*you will eat nothing but lead
from the brave militiamen.*"¹¹

Thus, the binary friend-enemy image of Muslims prevailed over the clashes in the region, reproducing previous stereotypes of brutality and bravery. Testimonies collected in the Escamplero area project the local population's fear of the arrival of the Moroccan troops to the area: "*The Moors are coming, the Moors are coming*"¹²; "*It was said that the Moors were coming with a carte blanche and (the people) were afraid*"¹³; "*The most fearful time was when the Galician Column entered. More than fear, people panicked, because the Moors were coming, and they were taking everything away. In Valsera it was terrible.*"¹⁴

Their role as cannon fodder during the conflict and the use of colonial warfare practices, which intensified fear among the population, reinforced the perception of the Moors as a terrible threat, suggesting a sense of impotence or inevitability in the face of their potential arrival: "*After a long year came the liberation of Asturias. We were all scared to death fearing that the Moors would arrive, they told us so much that we panicked. Thank God we did not see any.*"¹⁵

Thus, the crimes, abuses, and rapes attributed to the Moroccan troops during the Civil War solidified among the population and permeated the Spanish left, which contributed, according to Goytisolo (1985), to the consolidation of a secular anti-Moor prejudice (De Armas, 1938: 127–128).

The nationalist rhetoric, on the other hand, typically depicted the ferocity of the Moroccan warriors as valorous rather than brutal, exalting their honorable and brave behavior through their characterization as "lovers of war," imbued with "the spirit of crusade" (Bolorinos Allard, 2016: 8). As argued by Bolorinos (Bolorinos Allard, 2016: 10), the national faction was united by their veneration of the ideals linked to warfare and being a soldier, as well as the allegiance to the homeland, with Franco as their leader (Caudillo). These ideals represented for them the ultimate symbol of manliness and national pride, with the self-fashioned martial persona of the nationalists drawing inspiration from their depiction of the Moroccan fighter (Bolorinos Allard, 2016: 10). Nevertheless, the exaltation of the role of Moroccan soldiers by the Francoist camp added further complexity to the historical narrative by ingraining social and racial prejudices that have colored the interpretation and historical representation of Moroccans in—and beyond—the Civil War in Spain.

Unsettling binaries: The Present absence of Moroccan Muslim soldiers

The death toll of Moroccan soldiers during the Civil War has been estimated at around 11,000, according to military sources (Benjellon, 1988; De Madariaga, 1992). Despite these defeats and their important contribution to the victory of the insurgent forces, Franco's regime not only did not grant any economic compensation, as expected (Roldán, 2018: 222) but both Moroccan survivors and victims were treated differently than Spanish

soldiers¹⁶. Thus, to cross the threshold into the stories and lives of Moroccan Muslim Spanish Civil War soldiers unsettles long-standing binaries: both the perpetrator-victim binary assigned to the Spanish Civil War and the understanding of Muslim life as either deeply historical or newly migrated to Spain. First, motivated by economic rather than ideological means, much like the so-called Harkis who fought alongside France during the Algerian War (Enjelvin and Korac-Kakabadse, 2012), they introduce ambiguity into a dualistic victim-perpetrator narrative; with them also emerges the question of coercion, or at the very least pragmatic motivations, over ideological motivation for engagement in the war. As a local politician explained in our interview, *“An old inhabitant of the town [Barcia] used to talk about the battles where those soldiers participated; he narrated that the Moors would appear in the battleground and were shot by the Republican side since the casualties were so high, they did not want to go. What did the nationalist band do? They would push them to the battlefield to be killed. [...] a lot of them were very young inexperienced men, around 17 to 25 years old, who were paid to be there”*¹⁷.

Undoubtedly, the economic struggles faced in Morocco before the uprising (1934–1935) and during the conflict (1937), triggered by poor harvests, played a role in the enlistment of peasant soldiers. With little means of sustenance, many peasants were compelled to join the military in return for wages and the allure of potential plunder (De Madariaga, 2013: 327). Likewise, additional factors that encouraged such enlistment were the lack of attention by the Spanish Republic to the demands of the Moroccan nationalists, Franco’s skillful demagogic policy with these groups in the northern zone, and the coercive means employed by Francoist authorities in the protectorate when there was opposition to conscription (De Madariaga, 1988a: 513, 1988b: 591).

The bifurcation of Muslim life in Spain into a deeply historical period of Moorish rule and new migration from North Africa (of those again colloquially termed “Moors”) is also unsettled by this site (Planet and Madonia, 2018). When the local politician describes his motivation for transforming the cemetery into a cultural heritage site, he explains: *“I always talked to everybody and said ‘the Moors came. No, no, we don’t want to know anything about them.’ They were not Moors, then they were forgotten, and you feel sorry for them. They were people, but they were people.”*¹⁸ Here, he confronts the conflation of “Moors” with Moroccans across time. *“They were not Moors”*¹⁹, he asserts, unsettling the blanket relegation of all Muslims to this category of differentiation in Spain. He further emphasizes neither insider nor outsider status but humanity: *“They were people”*²⁰.

Through the present absence of these soldiers, the imagined geography of the Spanish nation entails the notable and purposeful erasure of modern Muslim history in Spain: a history that again complicates easy binaries, as it was paradoxically through the efforts of Muslim soldiers that Franco erected a regime based on the exclusive notion of *Hispanidad*. The Luarca cemetery speaks to how such imagined exclusions have been replicated in space, vis a vis both explicit and implicit practices of erasure, and thereby forgetting. However, these erasure practices from space and memory are not without contestation. As we point out in the introduction to this special issue, autochthony, the idea of coming from the earth, conflicts with the very presence of Muslim remains in European earth (Ceuppens and Geschiere, 2005; Geschiere and Jackson, 2006). Here, the rootedness of Muslim soldiers, through their burials in the soil of Spain, contends with the bifurcated

view that Muslims are either new migrants to Spain or long-ago occupiers of the Spanish nation. It also points towards a need to face this recent but still unresolved national and colonial history.

Muslim cemeteries and democratic memory

The majority of Spain's historic Muslim cemeteries, numbering around thirty in total, were established during the Civil War for the interment of Muslim soldiers (Salguero, 2023). Following the war, these burial sites no longer served their original purpose. While some have been restored to their initial functions, others, like Barcia, have been neglected.

In both Sevilla and Granada, as Arana Barbier illustrates in her paper in this special issue, Muslim communities have re-acquired Muslim cemeteries constructed during the Spanish Civil War through years-long back-and-forth petitions between the communities, the municipalities, and even the national government. Both are used for today's burials of those from local Muslim communities in Spain, beside the still interred bodies of Civil War soldiers. This is not the only outcome, however, as other such cemeteries, like that in A Coruña, Galicia, have been transformed into cultural heritage sites, with the bodies of Civil War soldiers exhumed and moved to municipal cemeteries in Spain or repatriated to Morocco (on repatriation practices of dead bodies in other European contexts, see Yasemin Ural). Still others, such as this site in Barcia, remain unsettled.

Parallel efforts to unearth Muslim spaces in Spain as part of national socio-cultural and architectural heritage have emerged. In the town of Tauste in the Ebro Valley in Northeastern Spain, 400 graves were found in 2020, dating back to the early Muslim rule of Iberia. In 2023, a Muslim cemetery was discovered in Granada during a construction project in the city. In Madrid, a new museum, Galería de Colecciones Reales, at the center of the town has been erected where the first fortified wall of the city was built under the rule of Emir Muhammad I of Córdoba; it is located where the Alcazar once stood, ruins of which were discovered during the building of the museum. The opening exhibition recognizes the Muslim origins of the Spanish capital (Hughes, 2023).

Such unearthing and recognition of the Muslim past as part of, not simply set apart from, the Spanish nation does not extend to the Moroccan Muslim soldiers during the Civil War. The reasons for this are twofold. On the one hand, it relates to the long-potent Pact of Silence that created a collective—if temporary—amnesia, not speaking about or interrogating the complexity of involvement, complacency, and inaction that helped to uphold the dictatorship: an attempt at top-down forgetting (Aguilar and Payne, 2016). Given that there has been a political shift to excavating mass graves from the Civil War and Franco's subsequent rule, it also relates to the Moroccan Muslim soldier, specifically, as an unsettling figure—unsettling binaries of good/evil, insider/outsider, perpetrator/victim—in the Spanish Civil War.

Almost a century of silence has only recently given way to still-largely-unfulfilled demands of remembering and reconciling with the Spanish Civil War: demands that are both nascent and highly divisive. Among these divisions, within Spanish collective memory, Franco and his soldiers are coded as perpetrators, and those that they fought—and conquered—victims of the war and the long dictatorship that followed (Iturriaga,

2019). In 2007, the Spanish government passed the first law on the politics of memory, offering funding to organizations seeking restitution for victims and the exhumation of mass graves, with a second passed in 2022, which has included a program of school lessons on the dictatorship as well as provisions for citizenship for those exiled during the dictatorship (Rubin, 2018). There have also been attempts by multiple civil society organizations (Ferrandiz, 2013) since 2000 to exhume the mass graves of those disappeared under Franco's rule (Druliolle, 2015; Rubin, 2018).

Regarding Barcia, there have not been exhumations, nor does there appear to be any immediate or future plan to exhume the graves. Following the Civil War, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Military provided assistance for the cemetery, directed via Melilla, to maintain and clean the area. This financial support continued annually until the late 1960s, after which the site was entirely abandoned by the authorities²¹. From that point until the early 2000s, the cemetery became a marginalized space in public memory (Tarrés et al., 2019)²². This situation began to shift following critiques from two local groups regarding its upkeep, addressed at once to the media and to state institutions, particularly the Ministry of Defense, presumed to be the landholder²³. Beginning in 2005, the municipality of Barcia contacted other local and national institutions to clarify to which entity the land on which the cemetery is located belongs, with the hope of requesting authorization for its care and funds for the recovery of the space. Although the question of land ownership was clarified in January 2006, when it was confirmed that it belongs to the parish of Barcia, there has been no centralization of efforts to obtain funds for its rehabilitation and care.

Against this backdrop, the suggested proposals have included establishing an educational center and transferring the site to the Muslim community in Asturias²⁴. Both initiatives have been refused by Barcia's local political representatives, concerned that they might create discontent due to the lingering scars of the Civil War and the lack of support for Moroccan forces among a significant segment of the population²⁵, potentially casting the present Islamic community in an unfavorable light²⁶. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that most of the Muslim population resides in central Asturias, a considerable distance from Barcia²⁷. The primary focus of the local authorities' initiatives has been on land restoration, heritage preservation, and facilitating visits to enhance tourism in the area. Among these proposals, the promotion of tourism has garnered the greatest backing from various political and economic stakeholders in the region²⁸, including from outside of Asturias, namely from the government of Melilla. In this instance, the revelation that many of those interred in Barcia originally came from Melilla piqued the interest of the autonomous city's authorities in participating in the site's preservation²⁹. This was further motivated by the centennial celebrations of the Melilla recruitment groups established in 1911³⁰. With this goal in mind, delegates from Melilla's governing bodies visited Barcia in January 2012, pledging an investment of 200,000 euros for its extensive restoration³¹. Although the aim of this restoration shifted from a focus on tourism to highlighting the existence of the Muslim cemetery "with the highest respect"³², the financial crisis at that time ultimately led to the abandonment of the project³³.

The exclusively tourism-based proposal has conflicted with the one promoted by the Muslim community in Asturias, focused on reclaiming the site for burial purposes:

*“The Islamic Community has visited the site several times, the first time in 2004. It is totally abandoned. We don’t know when it stopped being used. We have asked about it. The Islamic Community wants to have the opportunity to use it. We are 10,000 people. We currently have space in municipal cemeteries, but the Muslim rites are not fully accommodated there.”*³⁴. However, the Islamic community does not see these visions as exclusive, but rather their potential to be realized side-by-side: *“If the municipality of Barcia adapts the site, it could be a source of income. We are willing to cover the cleaning costs. Now, it is abandoned both for burial and from the historical-architectural point of view. We do not want to use it all. The most remarkable parts can be reserved for tourism, as a point of historical memory.”*³⁵

Nevertheless, the municipality of Barcia and the Islamic community continue to see their aspirations curtailed by the need for more institutional involvement in securing the cemetery’s future. The regional government attributes this lack of commitment to the absence of concrete information about the people and circumstances behind the Barcia burials³⁶, the high costs of possible exhumations³⁷, or the lack of communication with the Muslim community³⁸. The Muslim community perceives the situation differently: *“In 2012, it was declared Asturian cultural heritage. We were with the Councilor of Heritage in 2016, 2017, 2018...our interest is real, but we cannot be demanding it all day long. We are people who work voluntarily for the community”*³⁹.

Some political representatives who we interviewed considered that the act of preserving the cemetery, and through it, history, is conditioned by divisions, even age-old hatreds, which make it challenging to re-remember the past as shared history: *“The situation is widely known, yet there is a lot of indolence. There are people hesitant to act and prefer to avoid causing any disturbance”*⁴⁰; *“So the hatred of the sides continues, sure. As long as it’s not understood that it’s history...it’s what happened. History, right? And what you have to try to do is preserve what you have”*⁴¹.

The regional legal framework that regulates the recovery of democratic memory in Asturias is Law 1/2019 of March 1, 2019. In this context, the institutional representatives consulted have pointed to the law on “Places of Memory”⁴² as the most appropriate approach to undertaking any action on the ground within the framework of this legislation⁴³. The Barcia cemetery was included in the Inventory of the Cultural Heritage of Asturias in March 2012, which represents the second level of protection of cultural heritage at the regional level and is granted to those movable and immovable assets with a notable degree of heritage value. Based on this classification, only interventions that respect their historical and cultural values and do not endanger their conservation are authorized.

Nevertheless, the preservation project has stalled; it may never pass. The cemetery today appears abandoned by a lack of social and political will to a destiny of slow decay. One of our interviewees looks wistfully out over the sunken gravestones, this site of purgatory—between silence and speaking, between forgetting and remembering—where the life of the forest overtakes the manmade structures slowly, but not without consequence. *“What happened is with the passage of time, the trees fell down. They fell onto the souls”*⁴⁴, he says.

Conclusion: Making space for multicultural nationalism

In the Spanish collective memory, the Muslim imprint on Spain remains squarely relegated to an Andalusian past, both temporally and geographically distant and distinct from Barcia, Lluarca, in the region of Asturias where this cemetery stands. And yet the potentiality of this cemetery as a cultural heritage site remains, albeit one that does not exhume remains, in the words of our interlocutors: a transformation that would—by default, as it is on the highly-frequented Santiago de Compostela route—bring attention to the complex and layered histories of Muslim life in Spain. Preserving this cemetery in the way proposed by local politicians would create an opportunity for remembering the past. By opening up the understanding of Spanish society as formed and informed by Muslims not only in early modern history but also during the Spanish Civil War, preserving this cemetery as a cultural heritage site could create the opportunity to understand the complex and continued presence of Muslims as an integral part of Spanish society over time. Simultaneously demarcating this cemetery as a site of cultural heritage could speak to the reconfiguration of Spanish identity in the democratic transition, post-Franco era, in which *Hispanidad*—and the privileging of the Catholic Church—has been replaced by a notion of religious belonging based on physical presence in Spain present and past, one that includes Muslims across time. The preservation of this cemetery, as equally a place of burial and one of cultural heritage, would thus be an act of multicultural recognition, if not in life, by bestowing dignity after death (see Ural in this special issue on cultural belonging in death). While in life, multiculturalism entails recognition and respect for otherness, in death, it requires knowledge of the other. At the heart of the proposed recovery projects is thus an exercise in building expertise and moving from an amnesiac approach to the past to an active and collective remembering. As Alexander writes, “Multiculturalism dramatically expands the range of imagined life experiences for [a society’s] core-group members. In doing so, it opens up the possibility not just for acceptance and toleration but for understanding and recognition” (Alexander, 2006: 451). In the case of Spain, a truly multicultural society is one that understands and recognizes Muslims both present and, just as importantly, *past*.

With the uncivil status and explicit exclusion of Muslims from the Spanish civil sphere, Spain today faces a necessary confrontation with its past and exclusive notions of national identity based on religio-ethnic purity, *Hispanidad*, to construct a more open and inclusive idea of national identity, not only in life but also in death. This requires a reconfiguration of memory through testimonials of both living and dead (Zapata-Barrero, 2006). As Michael Rothberg writes, “By virtue of its circulation, memory in the form of testimony can help build counter public spheres dedicated not only to exposing the dirty secrets of the state but to refiguring what counts as a collective” (Rothberg, 2006: 180). The Barcia cemetery emerges as a potential space of testimony by and for the dead. We end this paper with the assertion that memory needs to be more deeply theorized in multiculturalism studies to create multicultural societies and national potentialities that recognize and uphold differences. As theorized by Alexander, civil repair requires layers of reparation: building back and making right through the opening of societies to those they long deemed others (Alexander, 2006). Studies on memory and unsettled pasts have centered

on what Rothberg terms “multidirectional memory”, specifically in the context of violence: “the interference, overlap, and mutual constitution of seemingly distinct collective memories that define the postwar era and the workings of memory more generally” (Rothberg, 2006: 162).

“The model of multidirectional memory, on the other hand, supposes that the overlap and interference of memories help constitute the public sphere as well as the various individual and collective subjects that articulate themselves in it” (Rothberg, 2006: 162). The struggle over the Barcia cemetery suggests the need not only to recognize but actively foster a specific form or formulation of multidirectional memory: *multicultural memory*. Bringing Alexander’s definition of multiculturalism into conversation with Rothberg’s definition of multidirectional memory, multicultural memory can be defined as *the overlap and interference of memories that help constitute the public sphere, specifically by expanding the range of imagined life experiences for the members of a society. The imagined community is itself thus expanded in the present through recognition of a shared history*.

Multicultural memory entails recognizing, respecting, and including differences. It would, in this case, entail upsetting binary distinctions between Spain and Muslims, as well as the binary understandings of the perpetrator-victim paradigm projected on the Spanish Civil War by recognizing a shared history. Focused on acts of “recovering and dignifying” memory, such as preserving and caring for the burial places of Moroccan soldiers, it has the potential to revise central claims on national belonging from the margins, expanding the imagined community by broadening the range of imagined life experiences for the members of Spanish society (Ferrandiz, 2013: 39). Including “alternative memory from below” (as in the case of the Harkis in France), would also speak to the memories of not only those in power and not only those in life but also the subjects of domination, including the dead (Enjelvin and Korac-Kakabadse, 2012: 155).

Paloma Aguilar (2017) has traced the generational invigoration in those twice removed from (the grandchildren of those who lived during) the Spanish Civil War as well as the local memory initiatives that have refused and refuted the Pact of Silence. Forms of local resistance to forgetting, excavation, memorialization, and memory-making have emerged since the transition to democracy. While multicultural policies and multicultural nationalism undoubtedly occur on the national level, local and regional efforts contribute to reconfigurations of belonging, and these “acts of remembrance” together forge group identities and understandings of the past.

Any configuration of multiculturalism in today’s young democratic Spain requires a politico-legal basis for inclusion and a foundation of multicultural memory. It is time to face the many lives and afterlives of the Spanish Civil War, the contradictions and paradoxes of the long dictatorial era that followed: those that we can recollect and remember, along the Camino de Santiago and beyond.

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ORCID iDs

Elisabeth Becker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7010-5957>

Paula M Arana Barbier  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0421-2129>

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Notes

1. The 1978 Constitution includes freedom of religion, and formal recognition of Islam was bestowed through the 1992 cooperation agreement, signed by the Spanish State and Islamic Commission of Spain.
2. Interview II, Barcia December 17, 2022; Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023; Interview IV, Otur September 7, 2023.
3. Archivo General de la Administración, Africa, 81/1114 Cementerios Musulmanes, Provincia de Asturias.
4. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.
5. See <https://memoriademocratica.asturias.es/>.
6. Interview IV, Otur September 7, 2023; Interview V, Navia September 7, 2023.
7. In informal conversation with the local vicar regarding the matter, it has been mentioned that the archbishopric has no inclination to engage in decisions or administration concerning the cemetery and there is no information supporting the burial or relocation of bodies from the Catholic cemetery, previously a civil cemetery.
8. Around Luarca and the centre of the region, it has been documented the presence of the following tabores (battalions) of Moroccan troops: III Tabor de Regulares de Ceuta, IV Tabor de Regulares de Ceuta, IV Tabor de Regulares de Larache, IV Tabor de Regulares de Tetuán, IV Tabor de Regulares de Melilla, V Tabor de Regulares de Alhucemas, III Tabor de la Mehala de la Gomara, and V Tabor de la Mehala de la Gomara (El Merroun, 2003; González Prieto, 2011; Vázquez Carril and Grandío Seoane, 2011; Álvarez Martínez et al., 2006).
9. Interview I, Oviedo October 29, 2022; Interview II, Barcia December 17, 2022.
10. At the local level, it is known that Ángeles González, who was born and lived in Barcia, managed to determine after numerous investigations that those buried in the cemetery were members of the tabor of Melilla. Interview II, Barcia December 17, 2022.
11. Authors' translation.
12. Testimony of N.M.S., born in 1918 (Rodríguez Fernández Biedes, 2002: 25).
13. Testimony of A.A.P., born in 1924 (Rodríguez Fernández Biedes, 2003: 63).
14. Testimony of M.S.S., born in 1923 (Rodríguez Fernández Biedes, 2002: 59).
15. Testimony of M. F. S, born in 1923 (Rodríguez Fernández Biedes, 2002: 107).

16. Once the war ended, most of the Moroccans soldiers were returned to their place of origin, but when Morocco achieved independence in 1956 (Benjellon, 1988: 222), the majority of units were integrated into the Moroccan army. In this case, the veterans lost pension rights from the Spanish government. Those who continued to be awarded, their pensions were drastically lowered, making them much less than what Spanish veterans received (Bolorinos Allard, 2016). Orphans and widows of Moroccan veterans had the right to pensions, but numerous deaths went unrecorded, preventing these families from receiving any benefits (Bolorinos Allard, 2016).
17. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.
18. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.
19. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.
20. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.
21. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.
22. Interview I, Oviedo October 29, 2022; Interview II, Barcia December 17, 2022; Interview IV, Otur September 7, 2023; Interview V, Navia September 7, 2023.
23. In 2001, the Green Association called for the cemetery's restoration and its handover to the Asturian Muslim community, making their demands known through a local magazine, *La Revista de Occidente*, and by writing directly to the Ministry of Defence in 2004. Furthermore, in 2004, the Barcia-Leiján Neighbourhood Association submitted a document to *El Mundo* newspaper, in which its president urged the Ministry of Defence either to undertake the cemetery's upkeep or to delegate this responsibility to their association for its refurbishment. See *El Mundo*, May 15, 2005.
24. See *El Mundo*, May 15, 2005.
25. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023; Interview IV, Otur September 7, 2023.
26. Interview IV, Otur September 7, 2023.
27. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023; Interview IV, Otur September 7, 2023.
28. See *La Nueva España*, January 22, 2011.
29. See *La Nueva España*, February 1, 2012.
30. See *La Nueva España*, January 12, 2012.
31. See *La Nueva España*, January 12, 2012.
32. See *La Nueva España*, January 12, 2012.
33. See *El Comercio*, June 2, 2012.
34. Interview VIII, Oviedo November 9, 2023.
35. Interview VIII, Oviedo November 9, 2023.
36. Interview VI, Oviedo November 7, 2023.
37. Interview IX, Oviedo November 9, 2023.
38. Interview VI, Oviedo November 7, 2023.
39. Interview VIII, Oviedo November 9, 2023.
40. Interview V, Navia September 7, 2023.
41. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.
42. By "Places of Democratic Memory", the law refers to "those spaces, buildings or places where relevant events have taken place due to their historical or symbolic significance or their impact on collective memory, linked to the struggle of the Asturian people for their democratic rights and freedoms, and also to the repression and violence against the population during the Civil

War or Franco's dictatorship, as well as to popular resistance and the upholding of democratic values".

43. Interview VI, Oviedo November 7, 2023; Interview IX, Oviedo November 9, 2023.

44. Interview III, Barcia September 7, 2023.

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